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ABSTRACT

The cognitive skills associated with the writing of fiction and poetry are equally important in analytical and evaluative writing. Excluding them from freshman composition in particular discourages the students from developing a genuine mastery of critical writing skills. Teachers of college freshmen should not define "creative" as the antonym of "expository," but should help their students to link emotional (affective) involvement with the critical writing at hand; or, conversely, to give critical attention to imagined situations. According to mystery novelist John D. MacDonald, there are three fundamentals in writing: (1) writers must be readers (students must read in order to associate reading with daily life, not just with the classroom); (2) writers must get outside themselves (they must be able to write to and from different perspectives); and (3) writers must abandon the idea that creative writing is all play. By presenting these fundamentals and by encouraging the development of creative as well as expository skills, teachers can help their students to write with the intensity of involvement that will make their critical writing both imaginative and engaging. (PRA)

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Freshman Composition and Creative Writing: Another Gap to Bridge

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**Freshman Composition and Creative Writing:
Another Gap to Bridge**

Although many of us suspect the validity of the boundaries separating one mode of discourse and another, we seldom question the virtual chasm existing between creative writing and expository writing. Granted, the aims of the two disciplines are different; but it is a mistake to ignore the potentially vital interconnections that creative writing pedagogy can provide teachers of freshman composition--just as it is a mistake to ignore any facet of writing across the curriculum. Eve Shelnutt ("Notes From a Cell: Creative Writing in Isolation," in *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy*; Urbana: NCTE:1989) writes of "the splitting off of creative writing from intellectual discourse" (6). A reverse situation exists in freshman composition: In our efforts to train students to think and write critically, we downplay--or ignore altogether--those habits of mind usually associated with creative writing but which are elemental to all forms of written communication: keen, engaging observation, distinctive voice. Yes, "creative writing," in the old sense, has been overemphasized; yes, it has been used almost rebelliously to counteract what had been perceived as an excessively pragmatic approach to freshman composition. But we must not allow misuse of an idea to blind us to the intrinsic worth of that idea. I wish to argue that

those cognitive skills associated with the writing of fiction and poetry are equally important in analytical and evaluative writing, and that by excluding them from freshman composition in particular we are discouraging our students from developing a genuine mastery of critical writing skills.

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In his Introduction to *Writers as Teachers; Teachers as Writers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston,1970) Jonathan Baumbach asserts that "the first job of a beginning writing class--creative or expository--is to get the student in touch with himself, to help him find his voice" (5). Now many of us who teach expository writing worry a lot about how much time we can spend helping students get in touch with themselves. We know that authentic voice is important, but we feel a strong obligation to focus on more tangible and more immediately *trainable* goals: formulating a workable thesis; structuring an argument coherently and in sufficient depth; using mature syntax, accurate diction, and error-free grammar, spelling, mechanics. We are inclined to agree with Elaine Maimon and others that freshman composition is indeed a "service course," that it aims to prepare students not to become "writers" per se, but to develop the writing skills necessary for succeeding in college; in other words, to regard writing as strictly a means to a more institutionally definable end.

I have serious reservations about characterizing freshman composition in this manner. I cannot think of a greater service than helping students to concentrate on themselves as individuals committed to ideas--to being writers in exactly that sense. Without commitment the notion of "authentic voice" ossifies into yet another "step" in the freshman composition catechism. As Sharon Crowley states, "Students take very little time or care in

completing writing assignments chiefly because they feel no real commitment to writing beyond the need to finish a theme." And that need, Crowley explains, comes from feeling of "dissonance in the writer's environment. . . . The author writes to find the source of the dissonance" ("Components of the Composing Process," *College Composition and Communication* 28 [May 1977]:167-68). The value of learning thesis-and-support and logical analysis is realized only when, to paraphrase John Dewey, mere sequential thinking is transformed into consequential thinking.

"Creative," then, is far from being an antonym of "expository." Creativity is a facet of mind, a drive that brings the scientist and the engineer, let alone the artist, to assert something new, or something old in a new way (see Jerome Bump, "Metaphor, Creativity, and Technical Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 36 [Dec. 1985]: 444-53). Creative thinking fosters better critical writing skills than when critical analysis is dissociated from imagination--a false dichotomy that Whitehead and others warned us about many decades ago. The crucial link, I believe, is emotional (affective) involvement with the critical-writing task at hand; or, conversely, critical attention to imagined situations (anyone doubting the role of analysis in fiction take another look at *Moby Dick* or Poe's detective stories).

Except for extreme examples of transactional discourse (such as technical reports), good critical writing is imaginative and engaging: Heisenberg on subatomic particles; Rachel Carson on the lethal effects of pesticides; Susan Sontag on photography. The reason is simple: *intensity of involvement*. Sontag, for example, probing for the behavioral roots of picture-taking in our culture, approaches her subject with one eye keenly analytic and the other caustically playful, poetic:

> Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention. Part of the horror of such memorable coups of contemporary photo-journalism as the pictures of a Vietnamese bonze reaching for the gasoline can, of a Bengali guerrila in the act of bayoneting a trussed-up collaborator, comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene. . . . [But] even if incompatible with intervention in a physical sense, using a camera is still a form of participation. . . . Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening.
>
> (*On Photography*; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977: 11-12)

It is important for students to realize that one does not write like this by "applying" anything. One must not say, for example, that Sontag "uses" analogy, paradox, parallel constructions, or whatever, to support her thesis. We are reading a writer passionately engaged in her subject matter, for whom emotional and intellectual involvement are indistinguishable.

My central concern is this: what specifically can we freshman composition teachers learn from our colleagues who teach fiction and poetry writing? What can we take back to the freshman composition classroom that can stimulate creative energy and critical thinking together?

I first mentioned observation. Anne Berthoff's first words in *Reclaiming the Imagination: Philosophical Perspectives for Writers and Teachers of*

Writing (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook,1984) are, "Any composition course should begin . . . with exercises in observation." Ernest Hemingway, known for his sage (and sometimes blunt) advice to writers, once told an admirer the following, in response to the question, "How can a writer train himself?"

> Watch what happens today. If we get into a fish see exactly what it is that everyone does. If you get a kick out of it while he is jumping remember back until you see exactly what the action was that gave you the emotions. Whether it was the rising of the line from the water and the way it tightened like a fiddle string until drops started from it, or the way he smashed and threw water when he jumped. Remember what the noises were and what was said. . . . Then write it down making it clear so the reader will see it too and have the same feeling that you had.
>
> ("Monologue to the Maestro," in *By-Line: Ernest Hemingway* [New York: Scribner's, 1967]: 219)

The implicit lesson here for freshman composition teachers is that merely advising students to give specific sensory details is not enough. Hemingway is not "advising" so much as recreating the writer's experience at the point of utterance.

I also referred to cultivating a distinctive voice. For students to do so, they must first feel in control of their subject-matter. The old saw, Write about what you know, should not be slighted in any writing class; but writers have also got to be *driven* to communicate what they know well.

"Often," Jonathan Baumbach writes, "the problem is that the very things that matter most to a young writer are thing's he's afraid to expose" (11). I want to stress that I see this kind of personal writing as useful for an *expository* writing class, not as an evasion of teaching analytical skills, but as preparation--preparation, let us say, for a critical analysis of the way childhood experiences shape adult behavior. The point is that powerful emotional curents course underneath every writing task. Emotions, asserts Susan McLeod, can be enabling ("Some Thoughts About Feelings: The Affective Domain and the Writing Process," *College Composition and Communication* 38 [Dec. 1987]: 432). Joseph M. Moxley reinforces this important and frequently overlooked concern when he states, "Writing is not solely a cognitive porcess, but a deeply affective one. . . . We intellectualize beyond value when we ignore personality in our theories and practices" ("A Writing Program Certain to Succeed," in *Creative Writing in America* 256).

Another important task--or set of tasks--is helping our freshmen truly to experience writing as a means of discovery. Composition teachers often pay homage perfunctorily to this credo by assigning various sorts of prewriting tasks merely as an isolated "step" in the composing process. Writing to discover--that is, to discover what one really wants to say about an idea, what assertions one must clarify or defend, what memorable examples to use that would help readers grasp those assertions--cannot come simply from a quick clustering exercise or journal entry. It needs to come from immersion--to the point of suspending awareness that one is "preparing an assignment," or aiming for "a good grade." To generate *this* kind of involvement, teachers must become effective respondents for their students, must see themselves more as catalysts than teachers in the usual sense. As we all know, nothing can dampen the enthusiasm for writing more

thoroughly than "correcting" a paper as though it were an exam. We say that our freshmen often have no sense of their readers; I disagree: they have a painfully keen sense of their read*er*: a single individual who doesn't actually read the work, but merely corrects and grades it.

When responding to drafts, in other words, we should be with the whole person's struggling with his or her idea, not with "formulating a clear thesis"; or "using strong, colorful verbs insead of relying on dull auxiliaries"--not that this isn't good advice; it is merely out of proper sequence. "Writing is not learned atomistically from the parts to the whole," states Moxley, "but holistically, from the whole to the parts" (255). Even before getting into an editing mode, teachers can give their charges subjective, holistic feedback designed to strengthen the motivation to work hard on their writing. Alan Ziegler tells an interesting story about this. As an undergraduate, Ziegler, having been virtually dismissed by a teacher who said of his Cummingsesque verse, "I don't like word games," stopped writing poetry for two years. When he resumed, he showed his poems to another professor. "A dismissal by him," writes Ziegler, might have broken me as a poet. But he told me how much he liked the poems, that they were 'good.'" Ziegler continues: "I was halfway out the door when he added, 'I don't want you to misunderstand. These poems are not *good*. Not by critical standards. But I sense in them that you can be a good poet. I can feel it.' That was the most important comment someone ever made about my work." ("Midwifing the Craft: Teaching Revision and Editing," in *Creative Writing in America* 215) Again, we are reminded of the relative ease with which we are able to reach students on the affective level. When we regard expository writing as strictly within the boundaries of logic and analysis, we tend to dismiss the affective as relevant; but it is what carries analytic discourse to fulfillment.

I wish to point out one other facet of creative writing pedagogy that teachers of freshman composition need to pay more attention to the emphasis our creative-writing counterparts give to their students' preparation in reading, in the experience of living, in the seriousness with which they should approach writing. Mystery novelist John D. MacDonald, always wary of creative-writing courses, insists on several fundamentals; the three that are most relevant to us are as follows:

--Writers must be readers. "Compulsive and omniverous readers," MacDonald states.

--Writers must get outside of themselves, their sense of their own uniqueness that the world is anxious to read about. MacDonald used to give his students viewpoint exercises in which they had to describe a scene or event from ten different perspectives

--Writers must abandon the idea that creative writing is all play ("brute labor" is how MacDonald describes writing)

("Guidelines and Exercises for Teaching Creative Writing," in *Creative Writing in America* 83-84)

Now let's consider these fundamentals from the perspective of the freshman composition class:

•Writers must be readers: I am astonished by how unaware of the world so many of our freshmen are. Reading the newspaper is not one of their habits; reading for pleasure will strike many of them as oxymoronic. MacDonald may have some say about the reading habits of his students at the time of enrollment, since fiction writing is always an elective. But freshman comp. is another matter entirely. We teachers of freshman composition are not entirely powerless on this matter, however. On the first

day of class, we must distribute guidelines that clarify our expectations of their reading habits: not only the daily newspaper but a comparative reading of one major story in at least three different newspapers, one of which ought to be the *New York Times*. Then, three articles (popular or scholarly, depending on what the class is focusing on at the moment) from three different disciplines, each and every week--reinforced by reading notes to be summarized orally or in writing. All of this in addition to any assigned textbook readings. The purpose is to get them to associate reading with daily life, not just with the classsroom.

•Writers must get outside of themselves. First, let's pause to appreciate the irony here. A novelist and teacher of creative writing is telling his students to be objective, to examine story situations in a detached, multi-perspective manner. Subjectivism is not only harmful to analytical writing, it is harmful to fiction writing--to any kind of writing. Freshman composition seems like the ideal place to help students make the transition between writer-based prose and reader-based prose, to use Linda Flower's terms. One method I like to use is to have students write a paragraph addressing a particular concern to three different kinds of readers; for example, a paragraph on the harmful effects of cigarette advertising addressed (1) to a parent who smokes heavily; (2) to the student's girlfriend or boyfriend who smokes heavily; (3) to an executive in the tobacco industry.

• Writers must abandon the idea that creative writing is all play One suspects that many students choose a creative writing course because they imagine it to be a snap, a free-for-all. But students enrolling in freshman comp., of course, harbor just the opposite attitude. Our goal, then, should be to convince students that, while it is true that writing is damned hard work, much pleasure can come from it--and the source of the pleasure

is the feeling of creative accomplishment derived from making meaning out of raw information. Consider this overnight writing task of mine: "Explain a strong attitude toward someone or something--an attitude you may already have tried to convince your parents of adopting, but have thus far failed to do so. But now you have a second chance; this time, you'll present the idea so insightfully and forcefully that they'll be sure to change their minds."

Let me finally raise a cautionary flag with regard to looking too closely at what our creative-writing colleagues down the hall are doing. Use with caution the "workshop" method--*their* sense of the term, not ours. According to Eve Shelnutt students in fiction or poetry workshops tend to lapse into a write-to-please mode, wishing to satisfy the conventional expectations of the group; uncommon viewpoints can get watered down by peer pressure ("Transforming Experience Into Fiction," *Creative Writing in America* 151). This is not to denigrate the importance of collaborative interaction, certainly. But teachers should never lose sight of the potential originality--and self-empowerment--that can arise through moments of creative reflection in solitude. □